The Unwomanly Women in Shaw's Plays.

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The concept of the "unwomanly woman" is closely linked to the cult of the Ibsenite New Woman. The New Woman, appearing again and again in George Bernard Shaw's plays is a product of his social speculations after he joined the Fabian Society as its principal spokesperson and editor of its pamphlets. The concept of the "unwomanly woman", another version of the New Woman carries a long lineage in literature since the 14th -15th century and looks forward to a development of an enriched academic pursuit of gender studies in the 20th century. Now who is an "unwomanly woman? Any rebel or protesting woman, who denied to abide by the dictates of the patriarchs as per the age-old societal practices was branded as "unwomanly woman", a term borrowed from Shaw's play **The Philanderer**. *She was singled out as a woman of considerable power, having the potential to subvert masculine domination. Shakespeare's depiction of the strong assertive female in Helena in* **Measure For Measure** *especially encouraged Shaw to portray heroines of similar mindset. Hence we have a series of "unwomanly women" in Shaw's 19th century plays starting from Blance in* **The Widower's Houses**, *Grace Tranfield, Julia Craven and Sylvia Craven in* **The Philanderer** *and Mrs Warren and her daughter in* **Mrs Warren's Profession**. *Subversive strong minded heroines recur even in the late 19th and early 20th century plays of Shaw, not to forget the upright Candida and Saint Joan in his respective plays Candida and Saint Joan.*

Keywords: *New Woman; Unwomanly Woman; Ibsenite: Female Empowerment; Shavian.*

Emilia: …it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
…break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us.

(*Othello, The Moor Of Venice*, 4, 3, 84-88).

Some lines later, she again repeats:

Emilia: …Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them; they see and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour.
As husbands have…
…
…have we not affections
Desire for sport, frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well; else let them know
The ill we do their ills instruct us so.

(*Othello, The Moor Of Venice,* 4, 3, 91-94, 98-101).

In Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, we hear Mrs. Warren declaring her opinions in the same robust tone:

Mrs. Warren: If theres a thing I hate in a woman, its want of character…And whats a woman worth? Whats life worth? Without Self-respect! I have always knew to respect and control myself.

(*Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Act II)

Emilia in Shakespeare and Mrs. Warren in Shaw represent the Ibsenite Women. My speculation in this paper is with such female protagonists who appear again and again in Shaw's nineteenth century plays like *The Philanderer* (1893), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and *Candida* (1894) as the most "Unwomanly Woman", who in Shaw's words "know how to take care of themselves" (*The Philanderer*, Act 1).

Probably the most momentous experience in Shaw's early years in London came when he joined the Fabian Society, for it was a meeting of kindred spirits with a common aim. The Fabians' declared purpose, around the time the society was founded (January, 1884), was that of 'reconstructing society…in such manner as to secure the general welfare and happiness" (Pease, Edward R, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 1925, p.193). It was a society of socialists, aiming at "the reorganization of Society by the emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individual and class ownership and vesting of them in the community for the general benefit" (Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches*, p. 39). They had a famous motto, "Educate, Agitate, Organise", which marked them as propagandists. Theirs was to be a new kind of socialism, spread by evolution rather than by revolution. Shaw, as the Society's principal spokesperson and editor of its pamphlets, made an enormous contribution to the Fabian Society. He spread the Fabian word by articulating the Society's corporate thinking through tracts and the *Fabian Essays in Socialism*. Shaw valued his Fabian experience, seeing it as of great significance to his playwright's role. He describes how he was able "to write with a Fabian purview and knowledge which made my … literary performances quite unlike anything that the ordinary literary hermit-crab could produce…He had in the *Fabian Politbureau* an incomparable critical threshing machine for his ideas" (Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches*, p. 68).

It is my conviction that Shaw's idea of the *New Woman*, the *Unwomanly Woman* emerged from his broader concept of Fabian socialism. What, according to Shaw is this Fabian socialism? Shaw brilliantly defines it in the *Fabian Essays in Socialism*:

> Since inequality is bitter to all except the highest, and miserably lonely for him, men come greatly to desire that these capricious gifts of Nature might be intercepted by some agency having the power and goodwill to distribute them justly according to the labour done by each in the collective search for them. This desire is Socialism.

Regarding the "second sex" Shaw is found to be more vocal in his tract, "A Manifesto" (Fabian Tract No. 2). The tract was read at a Fabian meeting on September19, 1884, just two weeks after Shaw had been elected to membership and it was duly published. In the context of bringing up of children Shaw opines:

> That the State should compete with private individuals- especially with parents- in providing happy homes for children, so that every child may have a refuge from the tyranny or neglect of its natural custodians.

The proposition that he makes here about women in a neatly turned phrase has more of a Fabian flavor about it:

> That Men no longer need special privileges to protect them … and the sexes should henceforth enjoy equal political rights.
>
> (Pease, The History of the Fabian Society).

It was to be some years before Shaw, in his highly practical play, *The Apple Cart*, was able to celebrate the first woman to hold the rank of Cabinet Minister.

Shaw's conception of the *New Woman* out of which stems the idea of the *Unwomanly Woman* may trace a close follow-up in the recent academic pursuit of "gender studies". Gender studies" was initiated in the late 1960s and its development was advocated by the second wave feminism. Along with developing a critique of gender inequalities, second wave feminism drew attention to the ways in which academic disciplines and social and political theories excluded the experiences, interests and identities of women. Women were almost invisible in the pre-1970s gender-blind sociology, only featuring in their traditional roles as wives and mother within families. Differences and inequalities between men and women at this time were not recognized as an issue of sociological concern and were not seen as problems to be addressed. In the

JOCAS
Journal of Commerce, Arts and Science
Volume: 3, Issue : 1, December 2020

context of the second wave feminist critiques, the arts and humanities began to pay increasing attention to gender. In sociology during the 1970s, the differences and inequalities as created by patriarchal society came to be regarded, especially by women sociologists, as problems to be examined and explained. Studies were focused on filling in the gaps in knowledge about women, gaps left unresolved by prior male bias.

Now this context of sociological speculation claims that the idea of the *Unwomanly Woman* should be clarified. Her existence was already quite perceptible in the preceding literature. Any rebel or protesting woman, who denied to abide by the dictates of the patriarchs as per age-old societal practices were branded as an "unwomanly woman" (a term borrowed from George Bernard Shaw's *The Philanderer*). She was singled out as a woman of considerable power, having the potential to subvert masculine domination. It is interesting to notice that examples of such "unwomanly women" were not few in number either in *The Bible* and medieval literature or in real life. Lilith, Adam's first wife abandoned her husband for good, after quarrelling with him, regarding their equality. The Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Noah's wife in the *Miracle Plays* are well known examples of female rebels. In the early Tudor Plays, *Johan Johan* (1533/34) and *Tom Tyler and his Wife* (c. 1561), similar cantankerous characters appear in the persona of Tib, Johan's wife and Strife, the wife of Tom Tyler.

The social history of sixteenth century England records that the Renaissance witnessed a new kind of visibility for outraged women, armed with household weapons and a moral authority, who united in a fearsome front against those unfortunate enough to meet them. The traditional form of protest most associated with women of the lower classes centered on bread riots resulting from grain shortages, which especially became acute during the instabilities of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, directly threatening the domestic spheres over which the women reigned. The most potent symbol of the independent "unwomanly woman" was Queen Elizabeth herself. "I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and a king of England too", was her famous declaration to the troops at Tilbury in 1588, where the Queen was reported to have appeared in a quasi- military costume. As Jonathan Dollimore speculates in his book *Radical Tragedy*, there went on "a serious undercurrent of intelligent thinking about women's status in a new commercial society" in early modern England (Dollimore 239). It is no wonder that all the exceptional female models, mythic and real-life, inspired both humanists and reformers to reconsider their estimate of women, especially the basic assumption of their natural inferiority. They might have also served as notable instances of inspiration for dramatists like Shakespeare and Shaw, eager to advocate female empowerment in their plays.

Shaw maintained that he had the support of Shakespeare's plays since in them "woman always takes the initiative". As for instance, Shaw strongly approved a character like Helena in *Measure For Measure* whose self-determination and her successful perseverance in her mission proves her to be a truly Ibsenite heroine and an Unwomanly Woman. In the Preface to *Man and Superman*, Shaw writes:

> I find in my own plays that Woman, projecting herself dramatically by my hands,…behave just as Woman did in the plays of Shakespear.

In Shaw's plays, woman is the dominant partner and man becomes a subject of complete domination. The man is visualized as the instrument employed by the female in her instinctive compliance with the Life-Force, its demand for fertility and its self-continuing process. The woman selects her mate and the man, though he may attempt to decide his own destiny, is overruled.

Shaw's *Unwomanly Woman* makes her appearance since very early in his plays. Blance, the female protagonist in Shaw's *The Widower's Houses* (1893) appears as the first of the many New Woman that Shaw was to present on the stage. Unlike the traditional heroine, Blanche is violent. When she loses her temper with her maid, she seizes her by the hair and throat. Sartorius'

comment about his daughter Blanche to Trench is most noteworthy:

> It is part of her strong character and her physical courage, which is greater than that of most men, I can assure you.
>
> (Act 2)

Blanche is defiant of all obstacles that may hinder her attachment to Trench. The text states:

> she is provocative, taunting, half defying, half inviting him to advance, in a flush of undisguised animal excitement. It suddenly flashes on him that all this ferocity is erotic: that she is making love to him.

Blanche retorts back to Trench:

> I release you. I wish youd open my eyes by downright brutality; by striking me; by anything rather than shuffling as you have done.
>
> (Act II)

Does not Blance remind us of a much earlier rebel woman like Katherine or Kate who in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is branded as a "shrew" because of her unconventional aggression and virility? In her exchange with Petruchio, the gentleman who has come to court her, Kate makes the strongest bid for linguistic freedom:

> Why sir, I trust I may have leave to speak,
> And speak I will. I am no child, no babe.
> Your betters have endur'd me say my mind,
> And if you cannot, best stop your ears.
> My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,
> Or else my heart concealing it will break,
> And rather than it shall, I will be free
> Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words.
>
> (4, 3, 73-80).

Theatregoers are to be accustomed not only to this New Woman but a new kind of courtship. Interestingly, this motif is seen to further develop in Shaw's next play *The Philanderer*.

The Philanderer (1893) exhibits novelty of ideas in its changed social codes of manners and behavior, especially between the sexes. In the *Preface* of this play, Shaw describes this behavior as "unpleasant": he says that it arises from outmoded marriage laws. Central to the play is the Ibsen Club, in the sheltered environment of which a new code of conduct can be acted out without incurring opprobrium. The traditional London club, the refuge of the well-to-do man who seeks to escape domesticity and femininity, is turned inside out, for this club is open to both sexes, and the "manly man", together with the "womanly woman" is excluded. The club also stands as a metaphor for the sheltered environment in which the Ibsenite woman, also known as the New Woman, and her corollary, the Ibsenite man act out their new patterns of behavior. The use of clubland and the many inversions of its customs, such as Sylvia Craven's wish to be addressed as "Craven, old boy" make good theatre. It is significant that Sylvia, when in the club, wears a Norfolk jacket and breeches, but has a detachable skirt ready at hand, presumably for when she emerges into the outer world.

Mrs. Jeremy Patterson was the model for Julia Craven in *The Philanderer* while Charteris was mainly a self-sketch of the early Shaw. Jeremy Patterson was tempestuous in nature who first fascinated and finally exasperated Shaw beyond endurance.

Grace Tranfield, Julia Craven and Sylvia Craven: each of these three women in *The Philanderer* represents some aspects of the New "Unwomanly" Woman. Grace, the widow, who is in love with Charteris, the philanderer of the title has learned to look with dispassionate eyes at the institution of marriage. She makes this anti-romantic pronouncement:

> I am an advanced woman. I'm what my father calls the New Woman… That is why I will never marry a man I love too much… I should be utterly in his power. That's what the New Woman is like. Isn't she right, Mr. Philosopher?

Julia Craven, who, far from rejecting the philandering philosopher, actively pursues him. She represents the more flawed New Woman. In behavior she follows fashion, rather philosophy. When previous conventional restrictions on behavior are removed as far as Ibsenites are concerned, she finds it difficult to contain the passion of her emotions.

When Charteris, for his own preservation, engineers a match for Julia and she realizes what he has done, her first response comes in physical terms:

> In a paroxysm half of rage, half of tenderness, she shakes him, growling over him like a tigress over her cub.

The young Sybil Craven, sister of Julia, is as yet

untouched by sexual love, but she has an important contribution to make concerning the attitude of Ibesenite men towards women: it is of the essence of Ibsenism. She tells Charteris:

> You talk to them [i.e.., women] just as you do to me or any other Fellow. That's the secret of your success. You can think how sick they get of being treated with respect due to their sex.

Shaw's own later attitude to the play raises further problems. In June 1896, he told Golding Bright:

> In *The Philanderer* you had the fashionable cult of Ibsenism and New Womanism on a real basis of clandestine sensuality"
>
> (Dan H. Lawrence. ed., *Bernard Shaw. Collected Letters*, Volumes 1 to 4).

Later in the year he wrote to Ellen Terry:

> I cannot make up my mind about 'The Philanderer'. Sometimes I loathe it, and let all my friends persuade me… that it is vulgar, dull, & worthless. Sometimes I think that it is worth playing.

The last of the "unpleasant plays", *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) is undoubtedly the most challenging, because in this play, the "Woman" question is inextricably tied to the issue of Fabian Socialism. Shaw makes Mrs. Warren's profession a metaphor for prostituted society by which he roundly condemns that society as one where the rich and the seemingly respectable prey upon the poor and unprivileged. The theme of this play illustrates the first maxim that Shaw wrote on behalf of the Fabian society:

> That under existing circumstances wealth cannot be enjoyed without dishonor or foregone without misery.
>
> (Pease, 41).

Widower's Houses had already broken new ground in entering the sociological arena. *Mrs. Warren's Profession* continued to do this, but in a much more sensational way. Typically in the past, if an ex-prostitute were presented on stage, she was shown as a tragic and repentant figure, hoping to shield her innocent daughter from knowledge of her blameful past. Here we have the respectable Mrs Warren, the ex-prostitute, living on the income derived from a chain of Brussels brothels (euphemistically known as hotels) of which she is part owner, and holding her own in society. She lives, with other members of the cast, in a sort of enclosed garden, distanced from the source of her income and other unpleasantnesses of life.

When Mrs, Warren's past is revealed and she talks to her daughter, Vivie, she tells her about the economics of the situation, and how respectable society derives its income from the poor and exploited. Speaking from an environment that includes her own country cottage and the nearby rectory garden, she tells Vivie, who is newly graduated from university:

> You think that people are what they pretend to be: that the way you are taught at school and college to think right and proper is the way things really are. But it's not: it's all a pretence, to keep the cowardly slavish common run of people quiet… the big people, the clever people, the managing people, all know it. They do so as I do, and think what I think.

Mrs. Warren had her origins from this cowardly slavish common run of people and it was from these that she made her escape. Her sisters were less fortunate: they were not eligible for prostitution. One of them worked in a white lead factory, a notoriously dangerous occupation. The other married a poorly paid Government labourer and struggled to raise a family on his wages until he took to drink.

Shaw's New Woman in this play is Mrs. Warren's daughter, Vivie, university educated and independent minded, who has won a scholarship to Cambridge. Shocked at the evils of society newly revealed to her, Vivie leaves the enclosed garden, rejects her mother and finds employment in the chambers of a woman in the city. From this vantage point she utters what might be well regarded as the key passage of the play:

> I am sure that if I had the courage I should spend the rest of my life in telling everybody…The two infamous words that describe what my mother is are ringing in my ears and struggling on my tongue; but I can't utter them: the shame of them is too horrible for me.

Candida (1894) does not belong to the previous group of *Plays Unpleasant*, but is rather considered as one of the *Plays Pleasant*. It is the reappearance of the Ibesenite woman in this play that I feel to bind it with the preceding three. The New Woman here emerges

in the title role of the Reverend James Mavor Morell's wife, Cadida. She is the Mother- Woman and in that capacity dominates the play. Candida, as a mother figure does not exercise the maternal function over her children- no play by Shaw has young children in it- but over her husband and boy-poet. Morell finally kneels beside Candida and confesses:

> What I am you have made me with the labour of your hands and the love of your heart. You are my wife, my mother, my sisters: you are the sum of all loving care to me.

But the more disturbing fact to note is that there exists an undertone of eroticism between this Mother Woman and the boy-poet, Marchbanks, especially at the beginning of Act III. Michael Holroyd, Shaw's latter –day biographer is perceptive of the situation:

> The affinity between them is that of mother and son, and the weapon that guards them from Hell is the taboo of incest.

The character of Candida has other Ibsen connotations. As for instance, when Candida has made her choice in favour of Morell, whom she sees as the weaker of the two men, she paraphrases Nora's famous words, saying: "let us sit and talk comfortably over it like three friends". But unlike Nora, Candida has no need to leave home: she has established herself as the dominant partner, and has joined the ranks of Shaw's New Woman.

I have limited my speculation to only some of the nineteenth century plays of George Bernard Shaw and focused on the Shavian treatment of the Ibsenite woman. The Unwomanly or Ibsenite woman has reappeared in different forms in Shaw's later twentieth century plays. In *Man and Superman* (1905), the New Woman is impelled by the Life Force to give birth to a superman and a new and imperial race. It is to this Life-Force that Tanner yields at the climax of the play. He tells Ann:

> I love you. The life- Force enchants me. I have the whole world in my arms when I clasp you.

In *Saint Joan* (1923), a much later play, Saint Joan, represents the voice of will or the Life- Force. But here she is the harbinger of nationalism, whereby each man shall be loyal to his king and country. Joan represents the New "Unwomanly" Woman in another way. What she asks for is not limited social freedom, but a cosmic emancipation in which the Life-Force will thrive unbounded:

> Bread has no sorrow for me, and water no affliction. But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills… without these things I cannot live; and by your wanting to take them away from me…I know that your counsel is of the devil, and that of mine is God.

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